

Fig. 1: site location and exhumation areas of the churchyard

# Life and death in suburbia: archaeological work at St. Mark's Church, Surbiton

Rachel Ives

## Introduction

The anticipated construction of a new vicarage and church hall on the existing cemetery of St. Mark's Church in Surbiton necessitated the exhumation of 200 burials under an archaeological watching brief. As the cemetery remains consecrated ground, the burials were exhumed under Faculty permission from the Diocese of Southwark. The archaeological works aimed to record evidence for burial practice and to conduct an on-site osteological assessment of the health of parish inhabitants. Burial Ground Services

undertook the exhumation, and the archaeological works were carried out by AOC Archaeology Group on behalf of Wilson Stephen Associates. All recording was conducted on site, and on completion of the works the burials were reinterred at the nearby Kingston Cemetery.

## Site background

St. Mark's Church is bounded by Church Hill Road, St. Mark's Hill and Adelaide Road in Surbiton, Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, and is centred on NGR TQ 1835 6760 (Fig.

1). Surbiton itself developed from a rural settlement into a fashionable suburb of Kingston from 1845. Suburban growth was particularly encouraged by the development of railways into London.<sup>1</sup> The church was built in 1844 on Surbiton Hill, but suffered extensive damage by bombing in October 1940 and was subsequently rebuilt.<sup>2</sup> Members of the parish were interred in the cemetery between 1848 and 1940. Burials are believed to have ceased in the grounds following the bombing of the church in 1940.<sup>2</sup> An historic plan identifying numbered

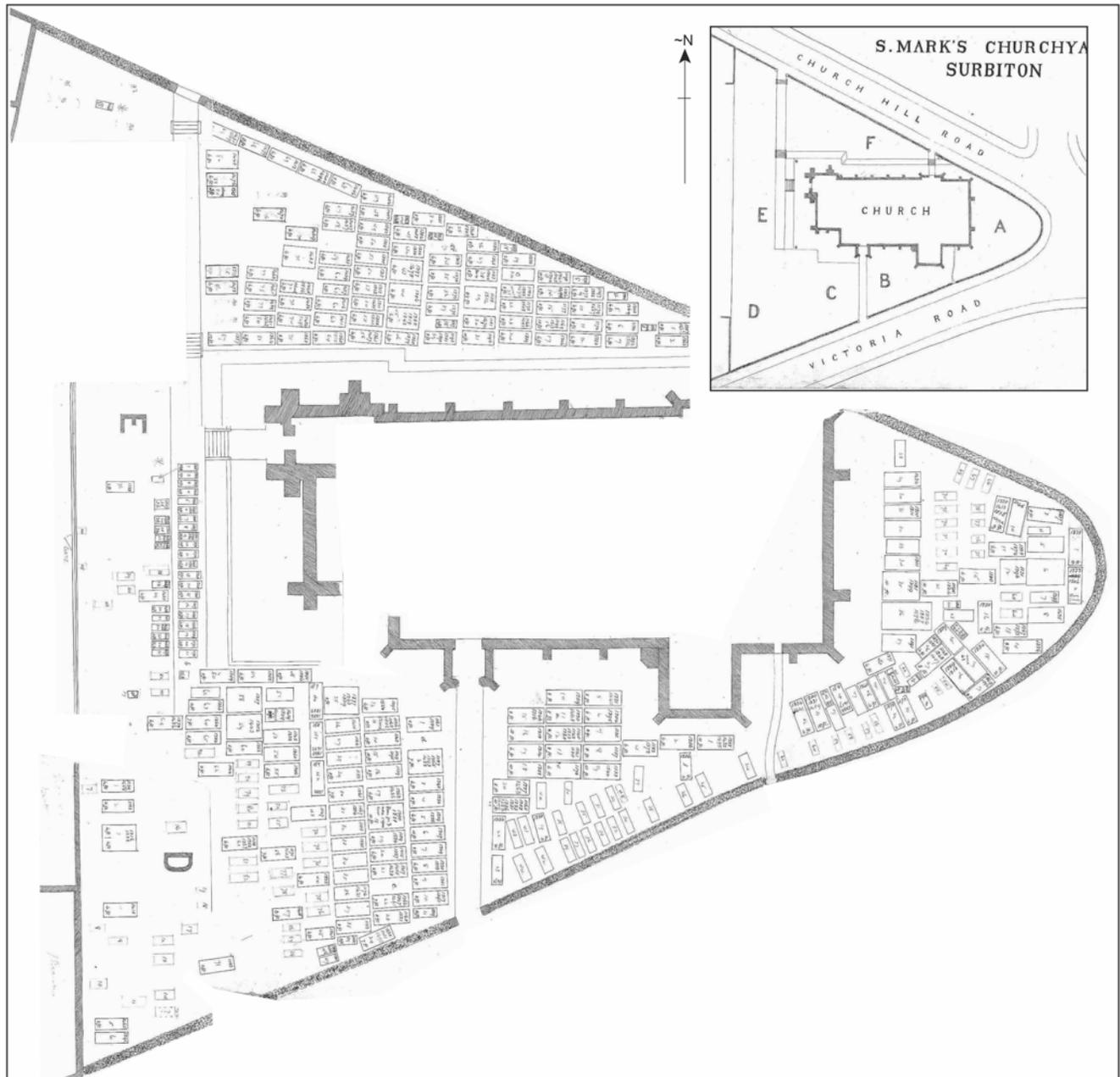


Fig. 2: example of the historic plan of burial plots to the north of St. Mark's Church

burial plots across the cemetery survives (Fig. 2). The burial registers however, only survive from 1871 to 1933. The exhumation was carried out to the north of the church in an area measuring 400m<sup>2</sup> and to the south-west of the church over an area measuring 600m<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1).

**Methodology**

The graveyard monuments and exhumed coffins were exposed by machine and archaeologically recorded following standard practice.<sup>3</sup> Owing to the relatively recent date (post-1900) of some of the burials, osteological recording was only conducted on well-preserved remains from wooden coffins

dating to the 19th century.<sup>3</sup> The recording established the age, sex, stature and pathological description of each individual.<sup>3</sup> Skeletal remains exposed via collapsed coffins dating to the 20th century were briefly recorded *in situ* before exhumation and reburial. In order to minimise health and safety risks, all intact lead coffins were removed for reburial without osteological study.

**The cemetery**

There was no evidence for pre-cemetery use of the site. Seventeen gravestones made from granite and robust sandstone were present in the development areas of the cemetery.

Varying styles and decoration were present, including Celtic and Gothic designs together with simple crosses, some embellished with climbing roses (Fig. 3). The embellishments appear to reflect the relative wealth of some of the parish inhabitants and the investment in memorials to family members.

In total, 200 burials were exhumed from the cemetery. The majority of burials (73%) dated to the 19th century with the remainder dating to the 20th century. All but one of the burials were found vertically stacked in brick-lined graveshafts, which were constructed from hard-fired red and yellow stock bricks. The number of stacked burials in a graveshaft varied between one and

age	type of burial	date	number of burials
adult (n = 164)	lead	C19	73
		C20	10
	zinc	C19	2
		C20	1
	wood	C19	45
		C20	30
undated		3	
juvenile (n = 29)	lead	C19	15
	wood	C19	10
		undated	4

**Table 1: number, type and date of the inhumation burials at St. Mark's Church**

six; the deepest grave containing six burials measured 2.52m. One earth-cut grave was uncovered directly below the floor of a brick graveshaft. The lower legs and feet of the burial extended beyond the walls of the overlying brick grave, and the individual may have been interred prior to the purchase of the shaft for a specific family plot. No records or dating evidence for this burial survived.

One hundred and eighty-five burials were made in single-width brick graves. A further 14 burials were made in brick-lined vaults capable of holding two burials side by side. All but three of the brick-lined graveshafts were sealed by stone slabs made from sandstone, limestone or grey-purple slate. Between three and five capping slabs were most frequently used. In one case, a single piece of slate was used to cap the entire 2.30m length of the graveshaft. The remaining three graves were soil-filled without stone capping.

### Inhumations

Nearly all (96%) of the 200 excavated burials were inhumation burials, comprising 85% adults and 15% juveniles (Table 1). Coffins were predominantly of the standard shouldered and tapered (single-break) type with only one example of a tapered trapezoidal form, broader at the head than at the feet with straight sides. Evidence of coffin decoration included black and white painted borders, panelling and cross-hatched incised designs. Decorative rows of upholstery pins manufactured as "nail lace" were also frequently present, often with

remnants of textile coverings.

There was a wealth of evidence for variation in the decorative lid motifs, coffin plates and grip styles. A total of 1164 coffin handles were found representing 23 different styles (Fig. 4). Four of the identified grip styles matched those manufactured by the Dottridge Brothers funeral furnishing company<sup>4</sup> and the reverse of one grip was stamped "Dottridge Bros. No. 2105". The reverse of a second grip was stamped "Clive", the mark of a rival coffin fittings supplier "Ingall's Parsons Clive and Co Ltd". Floral decorative lid motifs were present but there were very few cases of cherub and angel motifs, which are more typical of earlier in the 19th century. There was instead evidence for the adoption of simpler Christian iconography with crosses in varying shapes and styles apparent (Fig. 4). Wire frames for floral wreaths also survived on 23 coffins with no bias regarding sex. Rectangular or circular frames were frequently found, although in one instance a shaped frame of an anchor was discovered, most likely representing the symbol for hope (Fig. 5).

Whilst post-medieval burials frequently lack dedicated grave goods, a variety of personal effects were buried with individuals. They included wedding rings, earrings, bracelets and hair combs and a framed photograph or portrait. All finds were recorded on site and reburied with each individual.

### Cremations

A rare find at St. Mark's Church was the presence of seven cremation burials. Six of the cremations were interred in rectangular ceramic containers, with two bearing stamped seals from "The Cremation Society". In one case, cremated bone had been placed in an English stoneware multi-functional type of vessel (Fig. 6). Three small metal plates similar to coffin plates had survived, dating the cremations to 1918, 1920 and 1933 respectively. Two of the cremations had been placed in a grave together with an inhumation burial, strongly indicating a family association. The modern development of cremation in England originated from the 1870s, and the Cremation Society of England was founded in 1874 to promote the sanitary and financial benefits of cremation over traditional



**Fig. 3: examples of decorative gravestones found at St. Mark's Church**

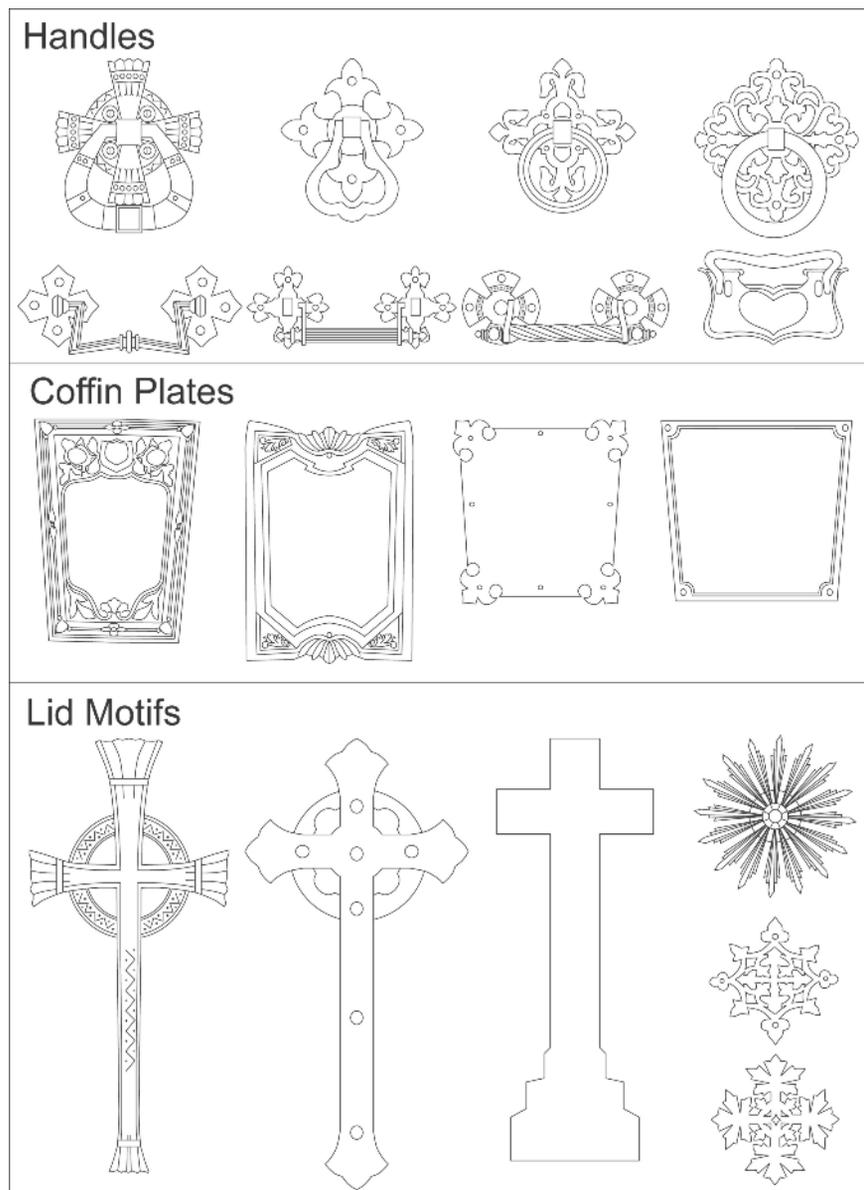


Fig. 4: a selection of the coffin lid motifs, coffin plates and coffin handles from the St. Mark's assemblage

inhumation. Cremation was not proven to be legal in Britain until 1902 and, even after this, inhumation remained the favoured and more accessible practice. Only 13 crematoria existed in England by 1918 and it has been estimated that by 1919, 99% of all funerals remained for inhumations rather than cremations.<sup>5</sup> Two crematoria may have been accessible to Surbiton inhabitants: the crematorium at Woking was opened for experimental cremations in 1885, and Golders Green, London, which was opened in 1902.<sup>6</sup>

#### Demography and disease

The survival of the historical records and coffin plates enabled good identification throughout the burial

assemblage, with the identity of 11 burials undetermined. There was a female bias in the total exhumed sample (111F, 78M) giving a sex ratio of 1.4:1 females to males. A peak occurred in juvenile burials aged 1 to 5 years (Table 2). Poor quality or fashionably selective infant feeding practices together with high rates of infectious illnesses, often contributed to high juvenile mortality in the later 19th century. Those individuals that did survive into adulthood were clearly able to live into older adulthood as the majority of adults were 56 years or older with a peak of burials aged between 76 and 85 years (Table 2).

Osteological recording was undertaken on 30/45 adults and 6/10 juveniles dating to the 19th century. Of

them, 66% had excellent bone surface preservation. Dental hygiene was poor in the sample, with carious tooth decay evident in 53% of the adults and near equal rates affecting males and females (Fig. 7). The build-up of mineralised plaque (calculus) was also present in 20% of adults. Both conditions indicate poor dental cleaning practices despite the availability of brushes, tinctures and contemporary advice for healthy teeth.<sup>7</sup> Periapical abscesses had occurred in 23% of adults. These lesions are caused by an accumulation of pus-forming bacteria in a cavity or cyst often at the base of a tooth root and which cause local bone destruction and inflammation of the surrounding soft tissues.

Given the extent of dental disease noted, it is perhaps not surprising that 63% of adults had lost one or more teeth during life, most likely related to poor dental hygiene and old age. Ten of the exhumed burials were found with dentures, two of which were hinged while the remainder had separate plates. More females (8) were found with dentures compared to males (1) and one individual of undetermined sex. It is not clear whether this indicates more cosmetic tendencies for denture wearing in females during the period than males. In one example, the denture was gold plated and featured an unusual design of a raised heart motif embellished in the centre of the plate (Fig. 7). In two instances, spaces for the wearer's own teeth, most frequently canines, were maintained in the denture. Further evidence for dentistry was also evident in gold leaf fillings and crown caps (Fig. 7).

There was very little evidence for respiratory disease in the sample; only two adults were affected by new bone formation on the ribs, one as the result of a more systemic non-specific infection and the second possibly caused by persistent coughing or episodes of bronchitis or pneumonia. Increased urbanisation and industrialisation contributed to significant smoke pollution and respiratory illnesses during the period.<sup>8</sup> The suburbs are likely to have been less affected than the heart of the capital, and this may be reflected in the results from St. Mark's. Three adults had been affected by childhood episodes of

vitamin D deficiency rickets, and one child had died in the active stage of this disease. Vitamin D is initially formed by exposure of skin to sunlight. A lack of exposure will limit vitamin D production, although a diet high in oily fish and eggs can also provide some vitamin D. Affected individuals may have spent their childhood in urban areas prior to migrating into the suburbs later in life. Alternatively, social or cultural practices may have influenced clothing styles or dietary practices during childhood.

The effects of falls and other injuries were also apparent. An old adult male had five fractured vertebrae most likely caused by a severe fall from a height. One elderly lady had died before full healing of a fracture at the hip had occurred. In this case, an underlying disease, age-related osteoporosis, had substantially weakened the bone, which had increased the risk of a bone fracture following a fall. A second elderly female had a healed fracture of the lower portion of the femur just above the knee, which had been complicated by a secondary infection. It is likely that bacteria had entered the blood stream when the leg was injured, leading to the changes in the bone. The individual



Fig. 5: variation in wire wreath designs for floral decorations including circular and rectangular designs compared to a wire-frame anchor



Fig. 6: two of the cremation burials found at St. Mark's Church. Note the variation, with one rectangular ceramic container compared to the English rounded stoneware jar of the second cremation

had received some treatment of the injury, as the remains of a white plaster cast were found *in situ* in the grave. The relatively wealthy socio-economic status of the burials may reflect greater access to medical treatment during the 19th and 20th centuries.

63% of adults in the osteological sample had indications of degenerative joint disease and more severe osteoarthritis had affected 20% of the burials. Joint disease occurs where there is progressive wear and tear or degeneration in a joint or else where unusual loading is placed upon a joint. Osteoarthritis had particularly affected the old adult females at St. Mark's in a similar pattern to that often seen in modern populations.

There was very little evidence for autopsy investigations in the sample from St. Mark's. Only one adult burial dating to the 20th century had been subject to cranial autopsy. No burials dating to the 19th century had evidence for autopsy. Autopsies were undertaken during the early post-medieval period to investigate cause of death and have been identified quite frequently on skeletal remains from burial grounds.

The practice is likely to have become more widespread following the introduction of civil registration of births and death in 1836-7, which created the issuing of death certificates outlining cause of death. It is not clear whether the lack of post-mortem investigation evident as St. Mark's

Age category	No.
Birth-1 month	2
1-6 months	1
7-11 months	2
1-5 years	6
6-11 years	3
12-17 years	1
18-25 years	5
26-35 years	8
36-45 years	9
46-55 years	11
56-65 years	20
66-75 years	24
76-85 years	38
86-95 years	13
96-100 years	3

Table 2: age-at-death of the exhumed burials from St. Mark's cemetery



Fig. 7: a hinged denture with gold plating over the palate embellished with a gold heart. Gold leaf filling in a second maxillary molar with complete destruction of the adjacent third molar tooth crown by caries

indicates a contemporary lack of need for this invasive practice or else reflects a lack of acceptance for such procedures by family members.

**Conclusions**

The exhumation under an archaeological watching brief at St. Mark's Church enabled a large and well-preserved sample of burials to be investigated. Insights into elements of continuity and change in burial practices were gauged, together with evidence for coffin manufacture and/or supply to the parish inhabitants. The style of grave construction and confined interments from St. Mark's were broadly suggestive of relatively wealthy parish burials. The successful survival of most adults into old age may have been aided by socio-economic status, although this by no means afforded

protection against some pathological conditions, most notably dental disease and progressive skeletal wear and tear. The results offer an interesting view into health status and burial practices of inhabitants of a recently developed London suburb during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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*Rachel Ives gained her PhD from Birmingham University in 2008 and has since worked as AOC Archaeology's osteoarchaeologist, studying human remains dating from the prehistoric through to early modern periods. Rachel particularly specialises in post-medieval funerary archaeology, co-supervising large cemetery excavations, as well as studying juvenile skeletal development, diet and nutrition and the effects of the metabolic bone diseases in the past.*

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 2. *Ibid*; also Revd D. Houghton *pers. comm.*  
 3. AOC Archaeology Group *St. Mark's Church, Surbiton. A Written Scheme of Investigation for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (2009) unpubl AOC archive; AOC Archaeology Group *St. Mark's Church, Surbiton. An Archaeological Watching Brief Report* (2009) unpubl AOC archive.  
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